Nozzle for plasma torches

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The invention relates to a nozzle for plasma torches and to a method for manufacturing such nozzles. Such a nozzle consists essentially of a metal or a metal alloy with an increased thermal conductivity. In addition, such a plasma torch nozzle is usually cooled. It can be employed for plasma welding and, preferably, for plasma cutting.

As is known, plasma torches have two extremely highly loaded elements. These are firstly, the electrode connected as the cathode, which is arranged within the plasma torch, and secondly, the corresponding nozzle, by means of which the plasma jet is directed onto the respective workpiece surface.

In this arrangement, the nozzle of such plasma torches is also subject to substantial loading due to the very high temperatures and, in addition, due to the flow kinetics of the hot plasma jet, which emerges through the nozzle opening and has a high flow velocity. Because of these effects, which in some cases are further increased by plasma pressure fluctuations, a removal of metallic nozzle material occurs, it being also frequently impossible to avoid delamination, cratering or flaking.

Correspondingly, the nozzles conventionally employed on plasma torches also have a relatively short life and must, in consequence, be regularly exchanged, so that the exchange of nozzles due to wear represents a cost factor for such installations.

The object of the invention is therefore to propose possibilities for increasing the life of nozzles for plasma torches.

According to the invention, this object is achieved by means of a nozzle for plasma torches, which nozzle has the features of claim 1, and by means of a

manufacturing method for such nozzles, as claimed in patent claim 13.

Advantageous embodiments and further developments of the invention can be achieved by means of the features designated in the subclaims.

The plasma torch nozzles according to the invention consist essentially of metal or a metal alloy, preferably copper or a copper alloy. In addition, however, wear-resistant microparticles of a hard material are embedded, at least in some regions, in the metal or the metal alloy.

Because of the embedded microparticles, the strength can be increased but, at the same time, the thermal conductivity, the precondition for an effective cooling of nozzles according to the invention, is only reduced to a negligible extent.

The microparticles embedded in the metal matrix should not exceed a maximum grain size of 30 µm, preferably of 15 µm. Microparticles can also be embedded whose grain size is in the nanometer range, so that the microparticle concept selected for the invention shall also include a grain size range between 0.01 and 30 µm.

Microparticles with almost constant grain size can be embedded in the metal or the metal alloy of which the actual nozzle for plasma torches essentially consists.

It is, however, also possible for microparticles within a specified grain size spectrum to be embedded, in which case the average grain size d_{50} of such a grain size spectrum should then be located around a grain size in the range between 1 and 5 µm. In consequence, particles, which are also smaller than 1 µm (as low as 0.01 µm), can be embedded.

The microparticles to be embedded, according to the invention, should consist of a hard ceramic material.

Different oxides, carbides, nitrides or also borides are suitable for this purpose.

Carbides, and here again silicon carbide or also boron carbide, have been found to be particularly suitable. The designated carbides, in particular, reduce the thermal conductivity of the nozzle material to only a slight extent and can, in addition, be employed in a manner favorable with respect to cost.

It is also, however, possible to embed microparticles of at least two of the previously designated chemical compounds into the metal or metal alloy forming the nozzle so that, if appropriate, an optimization with respect to the achievable strength, wear resistance and desired thermal conductivity capability can be achieved.

The microparticles to be embedded, according to the invention, can be arranged so that they are distributed within the total volume of a nozzle.

Taking account of the wear influences mentioned, however, this is not absolutely necessary, so that the embedding of microparticles can also take place with local differentiation and, by this means, it is possible to take account of the corresponding process conditions present in or on the nozzle during the plasma processing.

Microparticles can thus be embedded in the region pointing toward the inside of the nozzle so that the thermal and flow kinetic influences there can be dealt with more effectively.

It is, however, also possible to embed microparticles exclusively in the region of the nozzle opening.

In addition, however, microparticles can be embedded in a locally differentiated manner, with certain volume regions being free of microparticles. This can, for example, be realized by means of a strip-shaped, spiral-shaped or circular ring-shaped embedding of microparticles, it being also possible to form a

plurality of such mutually separated strips, spirals or rings.

The embedded microparticles should fill a volume proportion of between 0.5 and a maximum of 15% of the total volume of a nozzle according to the invention. A volume proportion of a maximum of 10% can, however, be sufficient to achieve the desired effects.

The nozzles, according to the invention, for plasma torches can be advantageously manufactured in such a way that a powder mixture of the metal or metal alloy employed, preferably copper or copper alloy, with the respective microparticles, is subjected to a preferably hydrostatic extrusion process.

By this means, at least one solid cylindrical or hollow cylindrical shape can be formed and an adequate thickness of the nozzle material achieved.

The possibility subsequently exists of forming the final nozzle contour by chip-removal machining alone or in combination with a metal-forming process. The final contour can, however, also be formed exclusively by means of a metal-forming process while avoiding chip-removal machining.

The invention is explained in more detail below using an example.

In order to manufacture an example of a nozzle according to the invention, electrolytic copper in powder form was intensively mixed with 4% by mass of silicon carbide powder. The silicon carbide powder had an average grain size d_{50} of 12 µm. A cylinder with an external diameter of approximately 20 mm and a length of 250 mm was manufactured from the powder mixture by cold isostatic pressing.

A smooth surface with an external diameter of 15 mm was obtained by chip-removal machining.

This cylindrical insert was inserted in a copper cylinder with a corresponding internal bore, which copper cylinder had an external diameter of 80 mm.

The external diameter was subsequently reduced to 23 mm by extrusion. The cylindrical body obtained in this way had a core region with a diameter of 3.8 mm, in which the silicon particles were embedded.

Using a plasma torch nozzle which was manufactured from this, a 30% increase in life was achieved, as compared with a conventional nozzle, this improvement being achieved in the case of the plasma cutting of structural steel, with oxygen as the plasma gas and with an electrical current strength of 150 A.